

Postscripts

By JACK POST

How many communities can boast of an historical society 100 years old? Duxbury can, but not many others even in this venerable commonwealth where we have always taken pride in our heritage. Ours, begun a century ago as the Rural Society, sought to improve and beautify the town, beginning with basic ideas like planting trees along the dusty roads, installing street lights so that the streets could be walked safely after dark, arranging for a watering trough at each end of town, one at Hall's Corner, another at the flagpole where Washington St. meets St. George St. That would give tired and hot horses a chance for refreshing water on a hot summer's day.

Our village improvement society, small though it was, carried considerable clout, for its members were most influential, and seldom hesitated to speak their minds, either to persons who failed to keep their properties in order, or if the occasion warranted, to the selectmen themselves. If nothing worked, the Rural Society was quite capable of putting up money, as they did for street lamps, and then insisting that nearby residents, or even the town itself see to the maintenance.

If humane reasoning indicated the need for watering troughs, the Rural Society would buy them. If a playground was necessary, the Rural Society could put up the money for 5 years or so, then sell the ballfield to the town when at last public opinion caught up with what the Society had long foreseen.

All this was after shipbuilding had ceased as a factor in Duxbury, during depressing years of economic regression when it took courage to insist that Duxbury should maintain its standards and move forward toward a new age, rather than giving up and settling into hopelessness; and part of the inspiration for looking forward came from the distinguished past. After all, Duxbury had existed since Pilgrim times, its people progressing from farmers desperately eking a living from the stubborn soil, to fishermen struggling at a subsistence level, to shipbuilders developing from small coasting craft to ocean-going brigs and barks capable of circumnavigating the 7 seas. Duxbury had pulled itself up by its bootstraps to become the leading shipbuilding town on the entire Atlantic seaboard, and had done so on its own merits.

No wonder the past could influence the future in Duxbury, and no wonder that people who remembered wanted to perpetuate their memories. How better to do so than to form an historical society, using the framework of the Rural Society, to collect the fast disappearing memories, first of the Pilgrim heritage, then of the glories of the age of sail? The idea took root slowly, but the seed was hardy, and the tree flourished.

Combining the effort to improve the town and to collect historical memorabilia, the Society acquired the Drew House from the descendants of Captain Charles Drew, thus eliminating an unsightly store and establishing a center for concern for the past. Cleaning up its own neighborhood first, the Society moved into what we would now call conservation, acquiring the woodlot opposite the First Parish Church and the Town Hall, then buying open land near Round Pond for quiet recreation.

The automobile changed the world, and Duxbury with it. For some years the horses only looked up from the watering troughs at the new-fangled vehicle, but eventually lost the race to automation; and Duxbury, with considerable thanks to the Rural & Historical Society, realized in time that it was facing an influx of new people who would not understand or care about history unless they were taught its value. Duxbury tightened its standards with zoning, conservation, and education, and the new people liked what they saw and settled in happily.

Up to this point, the Society had grown as slowly as the population. Then in 1965 came an opportunity to acquire the King Caesar House, home of the greatest of the shipbuilders, showplace of the town. That could not be accomplished by a small group; so the lists were opened, membership jumped, and the Society found it had acquired a major property and a heavy responsibility.